

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Helen Gerald, a/k/a Helen Faye Gerald,)	C/A No.: 4:24-5271-CMC-KDW
)	
Plaintiff,)	
)	
v.)	REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION
)	
City of Mullins Police Department,)	
)	
Defendant.)	
)	
)	

Helen Gerald (“Plaintiff”), proceeding pro se, filed this action against City of Mullins Police Department alleging a violation of her civil rights. ECF No. 1. Pursuant to the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(B) and Local Civ. Rule 73.02(B)(2)(e) (D.S.C.), the undersigned is authorized to review such complaints for relief and submit findings and recommendations to the district judge. For the reasons that follow, the undersigned recommends that the district judge dismiss the Complaint in this case.

I. Factual and Procedural Background

Plaintiff alleges the City of Mullins police department improperly assisted the county sheriff with an illegal eviction. ECF No. 1-1 at 5. Plaintiff contends the police department’s actions were outside their jurisdiction. *Id.* Plaintiff contends that pursuant to South Carolina law only the sheriff, marshal, or their deputies may evict a tenant, and only with a court order. ECF No. 1 at 1. Plaintiff alleges the City of Mullins had multiple officers at the residence in Mullins, South Carolina on April 1, 2022, but contends the officers did not have jurisdiction to be involved in any eviction without there being an emergency back-up situation which was not present in this case. *Id.*

II. Discussion

A. Standard of Review

Plaintiff filed this Complaint pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915, which permits an indigent litigant to commence an action in federal court without prepaying the administrative costs of proceeding with the lawsuit. To protect against possible abuses of this privilege, the statute allows a district court to dismiss a case upon a finding that the action fails to state a claim on which relief may be granted or is frivolous or malicious. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i), (ii). A finding of frivolity can be made where the complaint lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact. *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 31 (1992). A claim based on a meritless legal theory may be dismissed *sua sponte* under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B). See *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 327 (1989).

Pro se complaints are held to a less stringent standard than those drafted by attorneys. *Gordon v. Leake*, 574 F.2d 1147, 1151 (4th Cir. 1978). A federal court is charged with liberally construing a complaint filed by a pro se litigant to allow the development of a potentially meritorious case. *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. 89, 94 (2007). In evaluating a pro se complaint, the plaintiff's allegations are assumed to be true. *Fine v. City of N.Y.*, 529 F.2d 70, 74 (2d Cir. 1975). The mandated liberal construction afforded to pro se pleadings means that if the court can reasonably read the pleadings to state a valid claim on which the plaintiff could prevail, it should do so. Nevertheless, the requirement of liberal construction does not mean that the court can ignore a clear failure in the pleading to allege facts that set forth a claim currently cognizable in a federal district court. *Weller v. Dep't of Soc. Servs.*, 901 F.2d 387, 390–91 (4th Cir. 1990).

B. Analysis

Federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction, “constrained to exercise only the authority conferred by Article III of the Constitution and affirmatively granted by federal statute.” *In re*

Bulldog Trucking, Inc., 147 F.3d 347, 352 (4th Cir. 1998). Accordingly, a federal court is required, *sua sponte*, to determine if a valid basis for its jurisdiction exists “and to dismiss the action if no such ground appears.” *Id.* at 352; *see also* Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(h)(3) (“If the court determines at any time that it lacks subject-matter jurisdiction, the court must dismiss the action.”). Although the absence of subject matter jurisdiction may be raised at any time during the case, determining jurisdiction at the outset of the litigation is the most efficient procedure. *Lovern v. Edwards*, 190 F.3d 648, 654 (4th Cir. 1999).

There is no presumption that a federal court has jurisdiction over a case, *Pinkley, Inc. v. City of Frederick, MD.*, 191 F.3d 394, 399 (4th Cir. 1999), and a plaintiff must allege facts essential to show jurisdiction in his pleadings. *McNutt v. General Motors Acceptance Corp.*, 298 U.S. 178, 189 (1936); *see also* *Dracos v. Hellenic Lines, Ltd.*, 762 F.2d 348, 350 (4th Cir. 1985) (“[P]laintiffs must affirmatively plead the jurisdiction of the federal court.”). To this end, Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(1) requires that the complaint provide “a short and plain statement of the grounds for the court’s jurisdiction[.]” When a complaint fails to include “an affirmative pleading of a jurisdictional basis[,] a federal court may find that it has jurisdiction if the facts supporting jurisdiction have been clearly pleaded.” *Pinkley*, 191 F.3d at 399 (citations omitted). However, if the court, viewing the allegations in the light most favorable to a plaintiff, finds insufficient allegations in the pleadings, the court will lack subject matter jurisdiction. *Id.*

Plaintiff alleges the court has subject matter jurisdiction over her claims pursuant to federal question jurisdiction. ECF No. 1-1 at 3. 28 U.S.C. § 1331 provides that: “[t]he district courts shall have original jurisdiction of all civil actions arising under the Constitution, laws, or treaties of the United States.” “[A] claim of federal question jurisdiction is to be resolved on the basis of the allegations of the complaint itself.” *Burgess v. Charlottesville Sav. and Loan Ass’n*, 477 F.2d 40,

43 (4th Cir. 1973). Therefore, a complaint must “contain allegations ‘affirmatively and distinctly’ establishing federal grounds ‘not in mere form, but in substance’ and ‘not in mere assertion, but in essence and effect.’” *Id.* (citing *Cuyahoga Co. v. Northern Ohio Co.*, 252 U.S. 388, 397 (1920)). “[T]he mere assertion in a pleading that the case is one involving the construction or application of the federal laws does not authorize the District Court to entertain the suit.” *Malone v. Gardner*, 62 F.2d 15, 18 (4th Cir. 1932).

Plaintiff’s allegations that Defendant’s actions violated South Carolina state law fails to establish any viable ground for federal subject matter jurisdiction as these allegations are insufficient to show that the case is one “arising under the Constitution, laws, or treaties of the United States.” 28 U.S.C. § 1331. Because the court does not have subject matter jurisdiction over Plaintiff’s claims under § 1331, Plaintiff’s Complaint is subject to summary dismissal.

III. Conclusion and Recommendation

For the foregoing reasons, the undersigned recommends the court dismiss this case without prejudice and without issuance and service of process.

IT IS SO RECOMMENDED.

October 2, 2024
Florence, South Carolina



Kaymani D. West
United States Magistrate Judge

**The parties are directed to note the important information in the attached
“Notice of Right to File Objections to Report and Recommendation.”**

Notice of Right to File Objections to Report and Recommendation

The parties are advised that they may file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation with the District Judge. Objections must specifically identify the portions of the Report and Recommendation to which objections are made and the basis for such objections. [I]n the absence of a timely filed objection, a district court need not conduct a de novo review, but instead must only satisfy itself that there is no clear error on the face of the record in order to accept the recommendation. *Diamond v. Colonial Life & Acc. Ins. Co.*, 416 F.3d 310 (4th Cir. 2005) (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 72 advisory committee's note).

Specific written objections must be filed within fourteen (14) days of the date of service of this Report and Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b); *see* Fed. R. Civ. P. 6(a), (d). Filing by mail pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 5 may be accomplished by mailing objections to:

**Robin L. Blume, Clerk
United States District Court
Post Office Box 2317
Florence, South Carolina 29503**

Failure to timely file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation will result in waiver of the right to appeal from a judgment of the District Court based upon such Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140 (1985); *Wright v. Collins*, 766 F.2d 841 (4th Cir. 1985); *United States v. Schronce*, 727 F.2d 91 (4th Cir. 1984).